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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies exist that report the behaviors of elite athletes, but little research exists which describes the experiences of students within public school physical education classes. The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences articulated by ninth graders participating (n=67) in their last semester of required physical education. Field observations and interviews were the data collection methods used. The themes emerging from students' experiences were: "Gym is fun when I can do it," "I don't like what I can't do," "Gym is best when I can be with my friends," "Mostly, it's better if we are separated [by gender]," "To be successful you have to practice," and "I will probably be a couch potato." In general, the students recognized a pecking order in which those at the bottom are harassed and criticized for mistakes tolerated if committed by high-skilled students. The high skilled boys or girls in this study rarely helped the lesser skilled students, preferring to play by themselves as a group. Only those who were already active indicated any desire to continue with physical activity once their ninth grade physical education requirement was completed. It was concluded that a large number of students are being turned off to physical activity in part because of the nature and structure of physical education classes. (JBJ)

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Experiences of Ninth Graders in Physical Education Classes

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No one would disagree that physical education classes are composed of students of varying skill levels, from the varsity athlete to the low skilled. Numerous studies exist that report the behaviors of elite athletes, but little research exists which describes the expereinces of students within public school physical education classes. The purpose of this study was to describe the expereinces articulated by ninth graders participating in their last semester of required physical education. Literature on student performances, attribution theory, and gender expectations in physical education were used to frame the study.

Method

Site Selection

Seven ninth grade classes from three different high schools in northeastern Indiana were selected to participate in this study. Ninth graders were selected because they were in their last year of required physical education. In all, sixty seven students in seven different physical education classes (three different schools) were interviewed. Boys were interviewed less frequently (n=29) to girls (n=38) because of a failure to return the permission form. Twenty six of those interviewed were rated high skilled by the teachers, 21 were middle skilled, and 20 were low skilled.

To identify the skill level of the students, a teacher ranking system was used. This measure provided information form the teacher's vantage point of (a) knowing the content of the next unit, (b) knowing what had been previously taught, and (c) knowing each student's past performance in the class. The teachers were asked to assign the students into three skill levels of predicted skill performance for the upcoming unit (high, middle, low). This ordering was done before the start of each unit observed. None of the teachers noted any difficulty assigning a skill level to each student. In general, teachers identified more boys as high skilled and more girls as low skilled and tended to use the same skill ranking for the students regardless of the unit.

Data Collection

Field observations and interviews were the methods used to gather the information for this study. Each of the methods provided different kinds of information which were employed in describing and understanding the interactions of the students in their physical education classes. Data was collected over two continuous units of instruction. In all, one unit on soccer, two units on badminton/ping pong/shuffleboard, two units on badminton, two units on track and field, and three units on basketball were observed.

The physical education teachers and selected students or varying skill levels were interviewed. All of the interviews were semi-structured with some questions pre-designed and asked to stimulate conversation. The interviews were held outside of

the physical education classes, wither during study periods or lunch time and took place in a neutral room away from the gymnasium. All of the interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed by myself.

Results

The themes presented here are composite stories about the experiences of 67 students in public school physical education classes. The themes emerging from their experiences were: "Gym is fun when I can do it", "I don't like what I can't do", "Gym is best when I can be with my firends", "Mostly, it's better if we are separated", "To be successful you have to practice", and "I will probably be a couch potato."

"Gym is fun when I can do it"

All students agreed that they liked physical education classes better when they were successful. Students associated success with having fun and enjoyment. How success was defined varied among the students. For most, success meant doing an activity or specific skill that they already knew how to do. For example, Amanda said:

> I really like class when we are playing basketball. I am kind of good at basketball and I think it is fun. I can catch it and shoot it sometimes but I can't like dunk it. I learned it from my older brothers. They play it all the time. We have a hoop on the back of the garage so we can play anytime.

or Susan explained:

> I like it when we are swimming because I can do it. I have been swimming for a long time and I like it. At first, my daddy taught me then later he put me in lessons. And then I would swim almost every day.

This simple connection of liking what they already could do explains why they choose to continue those units or activities and discard others; Beatrice wanted more field hockey, Tony more tennis and badminton, and Leslie more volleyball to name a few.

"I don't like what I can't do

All of the students interviewed irrespective of skill levels or gender agreed that if largely unsuccessful, the activity was not fun and should be dropped from the curricular offerings. Higher-skilled students tended to drop square dancing and football in favor of other team sports or weight lifting, a subject some had been exposed to in the eighth grade. Nat summed up this attitude saying:

> I would eliminate square dancing. I would put in a time for physical fitness. How do you get your weight down and how to do certain calesthetics to improve your coordination-stuff like that. We don't do any weight lifting here unless you are in an extracurricular sport.

Lower-skilled students could name very few times when they were successful. Possibly because of their high rate of failure, they wanted to change the entire curriculum largely dropping team sport, competition or increasing skill practice. Brian stated it this way:

As long as you don't have to play an actual game. If you could just shoot around and not have rules and relays and stupid things like games, like we always do.

Where as Jennifer said:

If I knew how to play basketball it would be better. We play games but not like learn the skills. I don't think I got better in basketball cause we were never taught anything.

Experiences of failure were associated with feelings of personal failure, frustration, and anger. John summed up the feelings of some of the low skilled:

I was next to the last place in the walking race. I felt really bad as though I had let the team down or something because I didn't win. I was disappointed in myself not at anybody else. I thought I was going to walk a lot faster but there were a lot of people who were walking a lot faster than I was.

"Gym is best when I can be with my friends"

All students attributed their success or continued participation in class activities to having a friend as a partner or several friends on a team. Partners, in almost all instances, were chosen because their skill level or interest level were similar. Friends were viewed as safe--they were not critical of mistakes and students perceived they did better when they had the option to choose with whom they worked. As a friend was often of the same skill ability as oneself, grouping the teams by skill level accomplished the same purpose.

The higher skilled tended to pick partners that were as competitive as themselves. Several bragged their team won the badminton tournament or the ping-pong/shuffleboard tournaments. As Wilma said:

> In volleyball they divided us by groups of how well you did and I was in the better group and it was fun because people could hit it and you could play a game.

Lower-skilled students, also, liked having friends on their teams or as partners. Their reasons were different, however, from those of the higher skilled. Having friends meant you had someone or many who could commiserate with your playing ability. Brian:

> I didn't do well in volleyball. I went to hit the ball and I was like the stupidest person in the whole gym class. I went to go hit it and I ended up throwing myself into the net every time. I felt humiliated but at that time we could pick our teams and it was my friends on the team. There were no preps on my side so that made it easier. My team all laughed about it but it wasn't mean or anything like that.

<u>"Mostly it's better if we are separate"</u>

None of the classes I observed were co-educational. In three classes, girls and boys participated in roll call and exercises together but were separated once the activities started. In the four other classes, boys and girls were in different section of physical education. However, the students

in all classes reported having co-educational volleyball and square/folk dance units.

The students had very definite ideas about whether any of the activities should be co-educational. In general, the higher skilled students were more receptive to activities being co-educational, depending on the activities and the configuration of teams, than the lower skilled. Jill's, a high-skilled girl, statement reflected the worry that the high skilled had about mixed gender teams or even mixed ability teams -- that they might get paired up with the "losers":

> I think gym is boring. The thing that makes it so boring is that sometimes you get people on your team who don't want to be there or if you are playing a game and they would be like blobs on the court. You know, I love playing basketball, just a regular game, when it is officiated. It's not like wild every day like it is in our gym class. In class you can foul whenever you want and people don't have to sit down. And that is what makes it kind of boring.

The girls in general, and mostly the middle and lower skilled girls, resented co-educational physical education classes irrespective of the unit. They named harassment and critical remarks from classmates as their reason for wanting physical education classes to remain separate by gender. Many felt it was the middle-skilled boys who were the perpetrators. Leslie, a middle skilled girl, had this opinion:

> Keep it separate. When you play with the boys, they criticize you and everything. If you can't run, they say you are too fat and if you can't play volleyball, they laugh at you. Boys are terrible.

Chris, a self described low-skilled boy in volleyball stated it this way:

> When you do something good, it's like all right. But do one little mistake and they are all over you. They are all mad at you. It's more the boys than the girls that do it. The girls don't always do that well even if they are on the team, so they really can't say anything to you.

<u>"To be successful you have to practice"</u>

Whether students thought they could improve or not was closely related to their perceived skill level. Higher skilled students tended to work on skills until they achieved a degree of mastery with which they were satisfied. Being successful was due to hard work in their minds.

Tim said it this way:

> I am good in everything, especially football, basketball, and baseball. I worked hard to be good at them. I practiced long hours.

Low-skilled students, however, if successful considered it more attributable to luck or to the teacher's help than to their own ability. Success was considered to be the mastering of a skill or playing on a winning team, rarely did the individual low-skilled student win a competitive event or tournament in the

physical education class. Melissa expressed success in this manner:

> I can't hit the ball very good in volleyball. I have tried before but I am not good at it. I don't know why. The teacher taught us some serves and then we played games. Sometimes I could get the ball over the net, sometimes.

Or George, a low skilled boy commenting about other low-skilled students in his class said:

> They might try and do something like hit the ball but it goes that way and it goes another way.

Higher skilled players, conversely, considered all low-skilled students as low skilled because of their lack of effort to practice the skills. Tommy observed:

> Some people just stand there and let you serve it over and they just go opps when it falls to the ground

<u>"I will probably be a couch potato"</u>

Only those involved in athletics indicated a wiliness to take physical education the next year, if available. Some of the college bound students suggested there was no room in their schedule to accommodate another gym period -- even if they did decide to take another class. Outside of the athletes, few others had participated in any organized sport within the year.

Still others said they might take gym again, if the nature of the activities would change -either become more non-competitive, more competitive, or more relevant. Tony suggested:

> We don't do enough physical stuff. Like last year before gym, everyone hated it, but we had to run 10 laps before we

played the games. And you got in a lot better shape but I mean everyone hated it. But like this year all we do is play games.

And Miriam thought:

didn't think it helped anyone get into shape because those in good physical shape could run it fine and the people who weren't, just walked. So it really didn't do any good.

Finally, all of the low-skilled students interviewed not only refused to take physical education classes again but considered themselves unlikely to do any physical activity on their own. Most had the attitude of

Why should we do something that we are not good in and people yell at us if we make a mistake. I just don't need that.

or as Sarah stated:

I wouldn't take PE again, I just think it is OK. There is not one sport I like to play and I am not that good at anything. So I would rather not take it.

Discussion

The interviews revealed some interesting patterns of communications between boys and girls of different skill groupings, none which would be totally unexpected from the literature. In general, the students recognized a pecking order in which those at the bottom are harassed and criticized for mistakes tolerated if committed by high-skilled students. The sources of the harassment was similar to the results found in

Portman (1992) that low-skilled students experienced the harassment, largely, from boys only slightly better than themselves. Unlike Griffin (1984, 1985) the higher-skilled boys or girls in this study rarely helped the lesser skilled students, preferring to play by themselves as a group. This behavior of isolating themselves was tacitedly approved by the teacher.

Only those who were already active indicated any desire to continue with physical activity once their ninth grade physical education requirement was completed. None of the low-skilled indicated any desire to play more than pick-up games of basketball, play recreational softball, or recreationaly swim maybe during the summers.

Based on the themes, it would appear that a large number of students are being turned off to physical activity, in part because of the nature and structure of the physical education classes. Repetitive and perceived irrelevant activities, low-skill ability, and the competitive team/individual based curriculum are some of the reasons students gave for eliminating the physical education requirement altogether. For those students, physical education was viewed a drudgery, something you had to do in order to graduate. It was not viewed as something exciting, stimulating them into a physically active lifestyle.